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How to Promote Events

adapted from the Beehive Design Collective

Introduction

Event promotion can be challenging for DIY, radical, or anti-authoritarian activists. Because we usually operate without the resources of businesses, foundations, or governments, we're often unable to rely on traditional means of promotion like those entities do. And yet, our events are of a heightened importance for the other world we believe is possible... and happening. Particularly in regions where cultures of resistance to authority have not taken root in everyday life (such as, one could easily argue, the vast majority of the U.S.), events are a primary means of connection between radicals, our comrades, potential comrades, and the public at large.

As a young activist with 3-4 years experience "bottomlining" events now under my belt, I've already lost track of the number of times I've looked around the room to see none but the "usual faces." Because I need visual reminders, I have a sticky note on my wall telling me, "DO NOT GO TO THESE EVENTS" - meaning events that I already know won't give me much chance to meet someone new.

Organizing and promoting more exciting, inclusive events is something anyone can do - but it's a lot easier to do well after learning the lessons of those who came before us. That's why I'm remaking this guide from the Beehive Design Collective (www.beehivecollective.org) in zine form. I've edited the text somewhat to make it less-Hive specific, and added a couple of my own observations as well.

Radical organizing is tough, no doubt about it. With every mistake we make, we risk greater complicity with war, environmental destruction, systematic social isolation and all injustice. But with each success, small or big, we begin to create a new world from the ashes of the old. In the spirit of creating a new world that lasts, I hope you'll read and share these tips from the Beehive - then get out and organize!

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...AND SOME FINAL TIPS:

Go to other events similar or related to yours and ask the organizers if you can make an announcement at the beginning, or write it up on the board (if you're in a classroom) or put a poster on the door.

Sometimes painting a sandwich board or banner to put in a public square or high traffic walkway can be super effective. Many schools have spaces available to student organizations for such things, but they often take advanced reservation. Make sure to know the guidelines beforehand! And the key to a good banner is legibility - make sure the words are written clearly, in a large font and in bold colors that stand out from far away.

Don't list what time the event ends on your publicity materials, just when it starts.

If you have free/cheap/unlimited texting, sending out a mass text to all your friends a few hours before the event can be a great reminder that folks are likely to actually see and read.

If you are on a campus, sneak into some of the largest lecture halls before classes and write an announcement up on the board! Sometimes if you write it discreetly in the corner and put a box around it with note saying "please save," professors and janitors will leave it up.

Also, specifically for student organizers, make sure you check in with your Student Organization Office (whatever their unique acronym might be) to see what promotion resources they have available. They are there to help and sometimes they have the keys to otherwise hidden networks.

Phew! That's all we got for now. Good luck! And remember: start early, find some dedicated people and have confidence in your event!

LEAFLETS:

We Bees are not sold on the effectiveness of leaflets or quarter sheets. They mostly seem like a lot of former trees that ends up as scratch paper for phone messages; but other folks swear by them, so we are going to let y'all be the judge.

When making a quarter sheet/leaflet, bear these tips in mind:

- Keep it simple and eye-catching: bold fonts, bullet points, pictures and short messages will draw the reader in much more than a text-heavy flyer with lots of fonts
- Make sure to include place, dates and time of event
- Include your contact info, including email and website, and phone if possible
- Print these on colored paper

Places to put leaflets include:

- The cashiers desks at restaurants and shops
- Coffee shops
- Music venues
- Community gathering places

If you do go the leaflet route, it is usually more effective if you do this in a targeted way. Just standing on the corner and handing out papers usually means that folks will take them and stick them in their back pocket and forget about it. Instead go to other events that are related to yours, arrive early and put them on everyone's chair or on a table, or hand them out to folks as they leave. Or keep a stack in your back pocket and hand them out to folks who you are engaged in direct conversation with.

For leafleting to be effective, it usually requires a dedicated time commitment.



From the Beehive:

Hello friends! We Bees put this little outreach tutorial together in an effort to help provide a basic guide for folks hosting events in their community or on their campus. We also would like to offer up some tips we've learned in our Collective experience of being on the road and touring. This is a guide that is useful for folks who are fresh to organizing events as well as seasoned organizers. Even after 10 years of tour, we've found it's always important to check and evaluate our steps in promo-land--there's always lessons to be learned and new ways of spreading the word!

Now buzz inside!

BASIC TIPS:

Time is the #1 ingredient to a successful event. Any event needs a few dedicated people who will spend a few hours/week promoting the event in the month leading up to the date.

Find a committed group of folks to help with promotion and give that chunk of time mentioned above. Sometimes people rely on the venue and the local paper to do their advertising for them, but this is a mistake! This is not their event, so they aren't going to put as much effort into it as you!

A gig you're bringing in from out of town cannot be one of your main promoters. The truth is, they don't know your community like you do and probably won't have as many connections, much less the time to help do that ground work.

Confidence and enthusiasm are key! If you don't believe that your event is awesome and important, other people won't either.

"Studies Show" (which studies, we're not sure) that people are more likely to go to an event if they have heard of it three different ways independent of one another (e.g., heard it on the radio, received an email or Facebook message, and saw a flier at the coffee shop).

In this era of digital and online "social networking," it's easy to forget the importance of REAL PEOPLE NETWORKING. Nothing can replace face-to-face communication with another human. Use your personal networks to help spread the word! Friends, parents, co-workers, classmates - all are potential sources of information about the event.

Start Early! Try to get moving on some of these items at least one month before the event. Not all of them need to happen one month before, but try to get your "outreach game plan" in order and know when each step is going to happen. (Of course, for big events, one month may well be too late.)

USE ALL OF THESE STEPS! None of them will do it alone. Put them all together and you should have a good turnout. The goal is to make this viral, so that the promotion eventually exists outside of your dedicated group of promoters. Word of mouth advertising is often the best!

On University campuses, but also sometimes through official city or town governments, there usually exists "official" poster cases in all university or city/town buildings that is sometimes protected by glass and is where "university/city sanctioned" events can be promoted. Ask your student group resource office how to get your poster in the case. Usually it is free or pretty cheap, but they need the posters pretty far in advance (sometimes there's even a wait list) and there is a time limit that they can be displayed for, so be strategic with your timing.

Also, on university campuses you should check with the RA organizing body to see if you can distribute posters throughout the dorms. RAs usually have some programming requirements that they have to meet, so offering your event up to them might be a good way to have the RAs promote for you. Make sure they know about the event two weeks before, because it's likely they have paperwork to do in order to meet their programming requirements.

Some schools also have "official" programming boards, check with them and see if they can help promote, or at least hang posters in their offices.

TIP: Sometimes, these boards have large chunks of money to give to student organizations, but it often requires a lot of advanced planning, so be sure to check application deadlines for programming funds. The more detail you can lay out for them (time, place, flier, cost, people expected...) the more likely you are to get the requested funding.

POSTERS:

Posters are awesome! We love them and spend our lives making them, but posters alone will not bring people to your event! Make sure you do more than just flier.

Many groups - like the Beehive - have free and downloadable posters with a blank spot for specific details of your event.

Hang posters in popular and well trafficked areas about 2 weeks in advance (if you hang posters too soon, they'll over get taken down or covered up, or just become invisible to the eye if they have been in the same spot for too long).

Good places to hang posters are:

Coffee shops and cafes (they often have a community bulletin board) -- street kiosks -- stairwells -- public transportation hubs and stops -- parks or other public outdoor areas -- other community groups meeting spaces (with permission) -- public libraries -- bike co-ops -- light posts -- house show houses -- sidewalks (they won't last long but they'll grab peoples attention 'til they're destroyed) -- grocery stores -- classrooms that hold a lot of people -- bathroom stalls or mirrors -- think outside the box as well, maybe post some at the local high school or skate park.

On really big posting boards, put up more than one poster. If you post on really popular boards, your poster might be covered up quickly and you might want to check on it every few days to uncover or re-hang your poster.

Make sure you have good hanging/attaching material to keep your posters up - we suggest clear packaging tape for hard surfaces and tacks for cork board. Bring your own tacks - they're often all being used on community boards.

FINDING A GOOD VENUE:

When booking a space for the event, try to find a place that is well known and easy to find. It's super great if you find a venue that does some amount of its own publicity (publishes a monthly calendar of events/has its own email list) or has its own following in the community (Unitarian church congregation or community center).

Try to find a space that has a comfortable atmosphere. If we're all sitting in a concrete box with only florescent lighting, it might be hard to carry strong positive energy throughout the show.

Beware of seating designed for the top-down, "talking-head at the podium" type of event. Stadium seating just kills audience participation. If a venue has WAY more seats than required, it can be a bit demoralizing when even if 50 people show up, you all feel small in the space.

On campuses, we've found that rooms in student centers are usually more centrally located and are just all around a nicer place to host events - good lighting, comfortable seats, AV equipment on demand, etc. The school usually puts more money into the student center than department buildings because it is so public, hence producing a great resource for you. BUT because it's such a good space, you usually need to book rooms there far in advance, so again, get started early!

As far as venues in the larger community, don't be afraid to think outside the box. We bees have presented in infoshops, churches, senior centers, food coops, libraries, parks, coffee shops and more. Again, just bear in mind that if you want more of the general public to come, make sure it's easy to find; it helps if it's well known.

When publicizing the venue, understand that some folks are more mobile than others. Is it accessible by public transport? Is it wheelchair accessible? List the routes that someone taking public transportation or a bike might use, and say if free parking is available. If it's on a campus, a non-student might not know where that particular hall is. And include the zipcode to make it easier for someone using an online map service to find.



GATHERING COSPONSORS:

Reaching out to other folks within your community to help with an event is always a good way to spread the word and an important way to build long-term relationships and find new allies. We strongly encourage folks to reach out to local non-profits, community activist groups, religious institutions (hey, we Bees were once the keynote speakers at the New England United Methodists Regional Summit), small business, university faculty and staff, high school teachers, non-academic departments (like an Office of Sustainability or Diversity), and whoever you can think of who might be interested in the subject matter of the event, and see if they might have something to offer up.

Co-sponsorship doesn't need to mean getting money from people! There are lots of ways folks can help. For example, maybe the university history department just had its budget cut, but maybe they also have access to a sweet room with plush chairs and a built in projector and screen. Or maybe the local print shop can give you discounted prices on copies. Or maybe the local food co-op will offer to provide snacks at the event. Or the high school Anti-Racist Action group can offer to put up fliers. The possibilities are endless, and hopefully by having a diverse group of people invested in your event, they will help turn out people from different parts of the community.

Having co-sponsors often makes providing funding from sources like a university student activities budget more likely.

Provide any co-sponsors with copies of promotional materials so they can spread it throughout their networks.

When folks offer to co-sponsor in some way shape or form, always remember to include their name in the publicity materials.

FACEBOOK AND ONLINE NETWORKING:

Ah yes, the new wave of organizing and promotion. Admittedly, we Bees are a bit behind on understanding how to use these tools well. But we understand it's important nonetheless; here's some of what we've learned:

Create an Event page and invite people to attend, and tag all your friends on the post. Update the post every few days with a new comment, related news story, image or video to keep the Event fresh, and don't forget to ask your friends to invite more friends!

Use your personal Facebook, and repost the event announcement often so that it stays on top.

Turn your network of friends into promoters for the event! Ask them to comment, "like," RSVP, tag people, share, etc. with all their friends and contacts!

If there are local blogs with related content, reach out to the authors and see if they might post your event.

Post the event info to online calendars--there are lots of those out there, so be selective. Find the biggest and most trafficked ones (i.e. if you're on a campus, post it on the calendar of events on the university's home page!).

EMAIL:

Email is a useful tool, but bear in mind that most people don't read all of their email. It's quite possible that only 10% of the people you send a mass email to will open it, and even fewer read it all the way through. Even if a listserv has 1,000 people listed as subscribers, don't be fooled into thinking that they will come to the event just because you sent it over the listserv a few times.

Given that, emails to relevant listserves and individuals in your community are still useful. Send the first announcement out at least 2 weeks in advance, then follow up with a reminder as you approach the date. Sending the announcement out a few times over listserves is good, but not so often that it becomes annoying and people just delete it when they see your email in their inbox.

The most important part of using email for promotion is sending it out over a variety of lists. On universities, don't be afraid to approach professors or department heads that might be interested in the subject matter of the event and ask them to send it out to their department lists; if an event catches a professor's eye, they might announce it in class, or better yet, make it extra credit for people to attend (don't be afraid to ask professors to announce it or offer extra credit).

Ask your allies to send the announcement over their lists as well.

A little tip we recently learned is that you can change the "signature" of your email (you know, that place where people often put their contact info or an inspirational quote) to have the time, place and a short description of the event. That way folks see it every time you send an email.

Finally, in my experience, personal emails - or "personal" emails, in which you use pretty much the same text but change the name on top, - are way more effective than listserves if you know a lot of people. You can also read online about marketing firms that track what subject keywords are most effective - generally, phrases that include "I" or "you" words get a higher response rate.

PROMOTIONAL TOOLS and NEWSPAPERS:

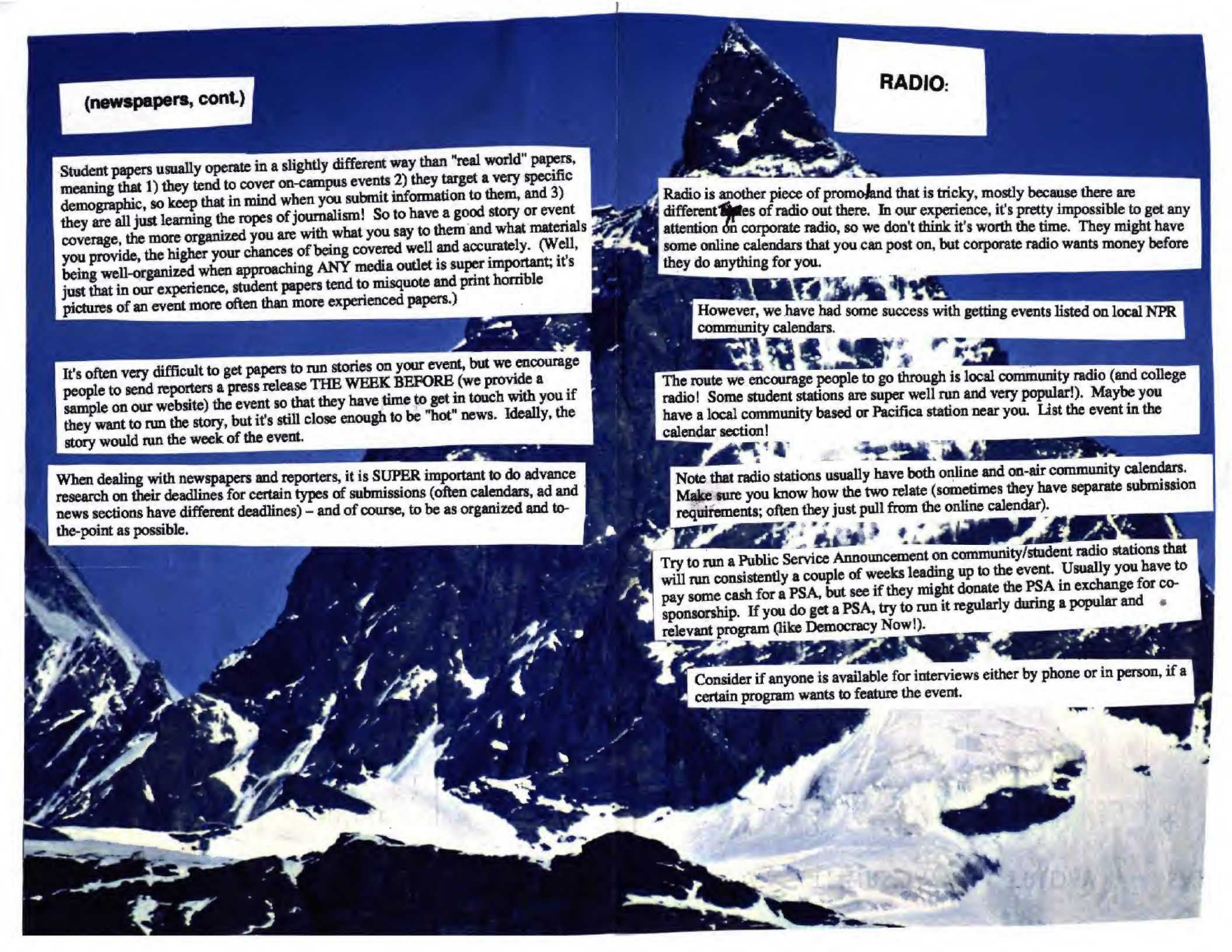
Many groups (like the Beehive) have a webpage with downloadable fliers, press releases, bios, print quality photos, etc. that can be easily downloaded and reproduced. Look for what already exists regarding the event you're putting on - or, if you're doing a series of events, you might create that "kit" for others to use.

Newspapers and other print media outlets can sometimes be tricky bases to cover in the promotion world if you want to do it well (mostly because it depends on interactions with reporters and newspaper staff, all of whom are all pressed for time and operate under tight deadlines). Some say that newspapers are not worth your time since print media is being overshadowed by online social media. But we still believe it's worth the effort since certain groups of folks still rely on the paper - and especially community papers - as a primary source of information. (We live in rural Maine, that's how all the old folks get the news!)

Submit the event time, date, place, and a short 2-3 sentence description in the "Community Calendar" listing of all local newspapers or other "entertainment" magazines. Also try to get it listed in the "Arts" section (if applicable), which sometimes has its own calendar.

Sometimes it might be worth it to take out an advertisement in one or two select papers that specifically appeal to demographics you're trying to reach (the local indy paper or example). Ask them to cosponsor for a discounted rate!





(newspapers, cont.)

Student papers usually operate in a slightly different way than "real world" papers, meaning that 1) they tend to cover on-campus events 2) they target a very specific demographic, so keep that in mind when you submit information to them, and 3) they are all just learning the ropes of journalism! So to have a good story or event coverage, the more organized you are with what you say to them and what materials you provide, the higher your chances of being covered well and accurately. (Well, being well-organized when approaching ANY media outlet is super important; it's just that in our experience, student papers tend to misquote and print horrible pictures of an event more often than more experienced papers.)

It's often very difficult to get papers to run stories on your event, but we encourage people to send reporters a press release **THE WEEK BEFORE** (we provide a sample on our website) the event so that they have time to get in touch with you if they want to run the story, but it's still close enough to be "hot" news. Ideally, the story would run the week of the event.

When dealing with newspapers and reporters, it is **SUPER** important to do advance research on their deadlines for certain types of submissions (often calendars, ad and news sections have different deadlines) – and of course, to be as organized and to-the-point as possible.

RADIO:

Radio is another piece of promo, and that is tricky, mostly because there are different types of radio out there. In our experience, it's pretty impossible to get any attention on corporate radio, so we don't think it's worth the time. They might have some online calendars that you can post on, but corporate radio wants money before they do anything for you.

However, we have had some success with getting events listed on local NPR community calendars.

The route we encourage people to go through is local community radio (and college radio! Some student stations are super well run and very popular!). Maybe you have a local community based or Pacifica station near you. List the event in the calendar section!

Note that radio stations usually have both online and on-air community calendars. Make sure you know how the two relate (sometimes they have separate submission requirements; often they just pull from the online calendar).

Try to run a Public Service Announcement on community/student radio stations that will run consistently a couple of weeks leading up to the event. Usually you have to pay some cash for a PSA, but see if they might donate the PSA in exchange for co-sponsorship. If you do get a PSA, try to run it regularly during a popular and relevant program (like Democracy Now!).

Consider if anyone is available for interviews either by phone or in person, if a certain program wants to feature the event.